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Richard Fox, *More than Words. Transforming Script, Agency, and Collective Life in Bali*. Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 2018, 264 p. ISBN: 9781501725357

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experiences of its elderly and the problems they face in modern Indonesia today. Although the authors do not offer a clear solution to overcome these problems, this book is highly beneficial not only to scholars but also for the policy makers in Indonesia.

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Richard Fox, *More than Words. Transforming Script, Agency, and Collective Life in Bali*. Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 2018, 264 p. ISBN: 9781501725357.

Writing and letters in Bali are not just ways to transmit, preserve and disseminate ideas and simple or complex messages and literature. In Bali, writing goes far beyond these more or less 'universal' simple reasons why people resort to putting things on paper, or nowadays in the mobile telephone or computer. Letters and writing assume more 'exoteric' and 'esoteric' roles in Bali which not only linger on but assume new and vibrant new roles on the island. We have little idea when exactly all this started and how or why, and it is refreshing that the author does not seem to turn this into a problem of great importance. Nor, for that matter, does the author seem very concerned about the number of people still fluent in Balinese script. The author is concerned about the multiple roles of the script in Bali rather than with abilities to read and interpret texts. Indeed, the book deals with the present. One thing becomes crystal clear from the book. On no other island in the Indonesian archipelago is the local, traditional script as vibrantly alive as on Bali and there is no reason to assume that this situation is about to change.

The question, of course, is why this is so and what the specifics are of the role or roles script and writing play in the religious, political, educational and every day life of the Balinese people. Richard Fox has written the present book to elucidate what is going on in Bali and he has managed to do so in an attractive and readable way. One of the key elements that needed to be explained and elaborated is the idea of 'religion' which, in Bali, is a question that cannot be answered in any easy way, as religion, ways of social and political life and the notion of interplay with esoteric and eschatological

matters form an intricate and indivisible aspect of life on the island. Indeed, the same holy syllable 'OM' may be found written in palm-leaf manuscripts on any matter from mantras to elaborate and long literary poems and prose texts, as tattoos on the bodies of young surfers in Kuta Beach, in offerings, as well as on little pieces of cloth that adorn buildings that have just been 'made alive' by an ordained Balinese high-priest after a colourful and intricate ceremony. In other words, the usual divisions of life and all its aspects as non-Balinese see it may not apply to Bali at all and indeed it does not. Script in Bali may assume the role of protector, of the disseminator of holy notions of the divine or for sorcery and healing apart from being used as a simple tool for writing.

Indeed, the book 'aims to unsettle received understandings of textuality and writing as they pertain to the religious traditions of Southeast Asia' (p. 2). The book aims to discuss and answer questions on three things: 1, it wants to make a contribution to 'the scholarship on religious uses of script and writing in Indonesia and the wider Malay region'; 2, to contribute to 'our more general understanding of textual practice and its assumptions regarding history and precedent'; and 3, to 'open up new avenues for thinking differently about our relationship to writing as practice and as a medium for actualizing ideals of human flourishing and collective life' (p. 2). In my view the author has succeeded in his task and the book shows expertly how complex the use of a seemingly simple writing system actually is and how, despite the onslaught of the modern world via mobile telephones, computers and social media this script is not seen as a relic from times past but as an inextricable part of every day culture.

The book is richly illustrated by photographs (made by the author) that show Balinese and their script in various contexts. The table of contents of the book is unassuming in its simple presentation but the chapter headings are intriguing and invite readers to ponder about what to expect and whether their expectations have been met. That we are dealing with a book that wishes to depart from traditional philological and anthropological practice may become clear from the main chapter headings, which are:

1. Manuscripts, Madness
2. Writing and the Idea of Ecology
3. The Meaning of Life, or How to Do Things with Letters
4. Practice and the Problem of Complexity
5. Maintaining a Houseyard as a practice
6. Tradition as Argument
7. Translational Indeterminacy
8. Wagging the Dog

Some remarks may suffice to elucidate a bit more what is at stake and some elements might have been elaborated in detail. For instance, the explanation of the Balinese script is short and some more detailed pictures of actual

Balinese handwriting might have given the general reader some more idea of what it actually looks like in Balinese palm-leaf manuscripts on healing, sorcery and in religious Old-Javanese texts. As it is, the short description with pictures of computer-made letters (*aksara*) is insufficient to understand the script and on the simple side especially since it leaves out the letters that express and contain precisely those elements that exceed the practical aspects of this script. Another aspect that may be of interest is that not every Balinese thinks of the Balinese script as something special at all and hardly knows that it has aspects beyond the, for him or her, 'obvious'. Because field work was conducted in one small southern Balinese ward the author called Batan Nangka there may be a problem of extrapolating the research findings to the whole of Bali or indeed to the whole of south Bali. Nevertheless, because of its geographical confinement, anecdotes of happenings in the ward and the author's reaction to them are amusing and add to the liveliness of the book. Another danger is that what has been observed in the ward may seem special but is actually something found on the whole island and thus is not special at all. One thing of a more serious nature is that it is in my view wrong to see Balinese written in roman script as 'transliteration' (p. 37) as most Balinese write roman script and cannot or won't write in Balinese characters. This is a perpetually confusing notion that permeates Balinese studies and in my view totally unnecessarily so.

The book is a breath of fresh air because of its admirable lucidity. It has been written in an accessible way and does not run away with theoretical language and thus does not alienate non-experts. This is crucial because it can now be read by non-specialists but also by specialists in other fields. It would be extremely useful if this book would be seen as an example of how indeed to study this kind of subject. A similar study conducted on Javanese script and its ins-and-outs would be fascinating the more as it has potentially more than 20 times as many users.

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Agung Wardana, *Contemporary Bali. Contested Space and Governance*. Singapore: Palgrave Macmillan, 2019, 289 p., ISBN: 978-981-13-2477-2.

I Gusti Agung Made Wardana fait partie de ces trop rares universitaires balinais auxquels fut donnée l'opportunité de poursuivre des études de doctorat à l'étranger. Ils en ont tiré diverses compétences précieuses, l'acquisition de l'anglais, la maîtrise des codes académiques, et même parfois un esprit critique qui fait encore fréquemment défaut à leurs collègues restés dans l'île.

Agung Wardana est professeur adjoint en Droit de l'Environnement